**Inequality in scarcity**

A quantitative study investigating unequal difficulties on the student housing market in Ghent

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# Abstract

Ghent University is among the biggest universities in Belgium. With nearly 70.000 students and a continuous growth in student numbers, the university is flourishing. However, the exponential growth over the past few years has not only been positive. Previously adequate infrastructure is hitting its limits, with housing being one of the major issues. The demand far exceeds the supply, and attempts to limit the negative impact of these issues often take years to realize. Who are the true victims of these problems, and how can we minimize the impact? In this master’s thesis, I attempt to uncover the current trends of the Ghent student housing market, and the possible issues at play within it. A specific focus is directed at international students, and how they navigate the market as newly arrived students in Ghent. Results show that international students face more discrimination and prejudice throughout their search for student housing and possess lower levels of cultural capital. However, due to the oversaturation of the market, these findings do not have a significant impact on the difficulties that students face. All students report high levels of difficulty, regardless of nationality. Experienced discriminatory attitudes, as well as high levels of difficulties experienced when searching for student housing, do have a negative impact on the positivity of the housing search experience. Those who are discriminated against or those who face more difficulties in general indicate lower levels of positive experience.

Keywords: Discrimination; Ghent; Housing market; International students; Cultural capital

# Introduction

The University of Ghent is among the biggest universities in Flanders, Belgium. With nearly 70.000 students in the academic year of 2018-2019, the university has grown exponentially over the past few decades (Universiteit Gent, 2016; Desseyn, Vanderlinden & Huysmans, 2021). In 2021, a record number of over 8.000 new students enrolled in the first year of university. This is a growth of over 5% compared to the previous academic year (De Morgen, 2021). One of the fastest growing populations of the university includes the international students. The community of students holding a non-Belgian preparatory degree has risen with over 10% during the past two years alone (VRT NWS, 2021b). With numerous international partnerships including the Erasmus Program, a global campus in South-Korea and a transnational program called ENLIGHT, Ghent has become a global university town attracting students from all over the world (UGent, 2014). University Rector Rik Van De Walle is happy with the growth in student numbers, but also expresses valid concerns, noting that *‘we are hitting the limits of our infrastructure’* (De Morgen, 2021, para. 1). Particularly on the student housing market, there is an acute shortage of accommodations. The 3800 official units that have been added over the past 20 years simply do not keep up with the growing numbers of students in the city (Stad Gent, 2020). The official accommodations provided by the university report over 30% more housing requests than usual, which the universities’ units cannot meet. Similarly, multiple players in the private market also report an earlier start of the renting season (Gordts, 2021). Informal platforms such as Facebook show increasing demand-driven posts, rather than the traditional supply of available dorms via advertisements. There is a severe scarcity in infrastructure, with several media reporting stories of Erasmus students staying at hotels, as traditional housing options for students are full (VRT NWS, 2021b; VRT NWS, 2021c). Multiple media sources have reported urgent appeals from students that are unable to find appropriate housing. Prices are rising rapidly across all types of student housing, and newly added housing options mainly consist of luxury dorms with corresponding price tags (Lakiere, 2022; De Standaard, 2022)

However, not all students seem to be confronted equally with this shortage. This year, student magazine Schamper reported on numerous difficulties experienced by international students with regards to finding suitable housing. According to them, the COVID-19 crisis and the consequences for international travel have caused a preoccupation of university dorms by Belgian students. Additionally, the often informal ways of acquiring housing on the private market (via Facebook groups and personal contacts) are more difficult to navigate for international students. They fear a major shortage of accommodation for international students (Lambert & Thiessen, 2021). Francis Ascoop, head of housing at UGent, confirms this risk in our interview. Increasing numbers of international students are unable to find appropriate housing. Similar difficulties are also noted in other Flemish university towns. When asked about the shortage of housing, president of the Leuven student association LOKO stated that *‘we notice that a bit, but especially for the international students. Apparently they have a harder time finding a room.’* (Gordts, 2021, para. 9). Although a lot of academic research has been conducted concerning discrimination on the housing market in Ghent, little to no special attention has been paid to student housing. Considering the informal character of this market, discrimination levels and arising problems are likely to differ significantly from those found by current academic research. Recently, the Flemish Association for Students has called upon the government to engage in so-called ‘correspondence tests’, in which emails are sent out with discriminatory requests. By conducting these tests, land lords who comply with discriminatory practices can be identified and timely action can be taken if discrimination occurs. The association has received multiple complaints of students who are being discriminated against on the basis of their origin or sexual orientation when looking for student housing (VRT NWS, 2022).

Do international students face significantly more problems with regards to housing, and if so, what are the causes of this occurrence? In this quantitative study, I will attempt to uncover and explain differences in housing opportunities between international and Belgian students. In a first section, I will explore the current state of affairs by drawing out an overview of the Ghent student housing market, including its the distinct characteristics and trends. A second section explores the theoretical framework that exists around the structural problems that international students face within the housing market, and the expected consequences. Afterwards, a quantitative study will be performed on a sample of both Belgian and international students to better understand the tendencies that are in place within the private student housing market and to uncover possible discrimination taking place.

# An overview of the Ghent housing market

**2.1 Background**

In order to understand the housing issue in Ghent, it is important to sketch a short background of the city and its possibilities of student housing. Ghent is a city located in the province of East-Flanders, Belgium. As of May 2022, Ghent counts approximately 264.666 inhabitants, making it one of Flanders largest cities (Stad Gent, 2022). Within Ghent, five institutions of higher education are represented: Ghent University (UGent), Catholic University of Leuven (KULeuven), Artevelde University of Applied Sciences (Arteveldehogeschool), Hogeschool Gent (HOGent), Odisee and Luca School of Arts. The main focus of this research will lie on the University of Ghent. This is the largest provider of higher education within the city and also the institution with the highest percentage of international students. Campuses and institutions are spread across the city, and consequently, student housing is found in almost every neighborhood (Mpiris, 2021). Figure one shows the current location of student housing on the map of Ghent.

Afbeelding met kaart

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

*Figure one: Current situation in terms of location. Mpiris, 2021.*

Based upon recent research by Mpiris (2021), I will offer a simplified classification of five types of student housing within the city: (1) A regular dorm on the private market. This dorm is traditionally the most popular form of student housing. Private individuals rent out rooms specifically designed for students. Often, students share certain facilities with other students living in the same dorm or hallway. This can include shared kitchens, bathrooms and living spaces. Allocation of these units can go through real estate agents, specifically designed websites, social media groups or via personal contacts. (2) Student homes. Student homes are blocks of housing units specifically designed for students, provided by the institution of higher education. The university of Ghent currently offers units in seven different homes located in and around the city of Ghent. Allocation of the units happens via the official channels of the institution. (3) Co-housing in apartments or family homes. Due to a rising number of students in Ghent, and with it the rising prices of accommodation, a number of students redirect from traditional options of housing towards new concepts. Co-housing in apartments and family homes has grown in popularity over the past few years. Sharing an accommodation with friends or co-students often suppresses costs and expands housing possibilities for students. (4) Large-scale student housing, not related to a certain institution. Large private players have also increasingly entered the market. Private investors often offer units within large-scale, newly constructed buildings. Generally, these units are more luxurious than traditional student housing. This, of course, also comes with a higher price range. (5) Other options. This can include living alone in an apartment, house or hospita-living.

In its research, Mpiris outcomes point towards the following statistics: 46% of non-international students live in regular private dorms. 21% co-house in an apartment or family home and 15% live in student homes run by the university. Another 9% live in large-scale student housing that is not related to the university, and the other 9% have found different forms of accommodation. For international students, the distribution is slightly different, with 32% living in student dorms provided by the university, 25% in co-housing situations and only 18% on the regular private market.

The average price of a dorm within the city of Ghent is €415, with traditional dorms on the private market and large-scale student housing on the private market falling above that average. On the other hand, co-housing in family homes and student homes is cheaper relative to the general average. 82% of students point towards parents and relatives as the paying party for the housing costs (Stad Gent, 2020).

**2.2 Formal vs. student housing**

The student housing market in Ghent consists of very specific characteristics, that are not always present in the formal housing market. These characteristics need to be taken into account when studying the market. In the following paragraphs, I will lay out the most notable differences between the formal housing market and the student housing market in Ghent.

Firstly, the student housing market in Ghent mainly runs through informal channels, such as Facebook groups and personal contacts. This is very different from the formal housing market, working mainly with real estate agencies. The renting often happens without intermediate contacts and real estate agents. House owners are much more involved within the renting process.

Secondly, the duration of renting is different. On the formal market, renting a unit often requires a minimum commitment of one year. In some cases, this can go up to three or even nine years. Inhabitants often stay in these homes for longer periods of time. The student market deals with much shorter renting periods, often of one year or a few months. This is due to the nature of student life and the interchangeable possibilities that it offers. Especially during the last few decades, the increase of international exchanges and Erasmus programs has caused an arrival of an unprecedented number of short-term (international) students in the city.

Thirdly, students can opt for housing that does not require domicile. If the dorm that they are renting is used as a place for study, students can choose to keep their domicile at their home address. This choice heavily impacts the legal regulations under which the landlord and tenant sign the contract. A specific student-oriented contract without domicile includes special regulations concerning the warranty, sub renting and the requirements of the room (Kotweb, 2012; Stad Gent, 2020; notaris.be, 2020). A student contract also terminates automatically after the end date, providing an advantage for both the tenant and the landlord. The student can leave after this period without consequences, while the landlord can refuse to prolong the contract if troubles with the tenant have occurred (Vlaanderen, 2019). If a student decides to rent a room with domicile, they have to be financially independent and fall under the general housing rental laws. These regulations are much more rigid, both for landlords and tenants (Kotweb, 2012).

**2.3 Shortage on the market**

In 2018, for every 100 inhabitants of Ghent, there were 28 students (Stad Gent, 2018). Over the last nine academic years, student numbers have increased by 16.1% (Stad Gent, 2022), suggesting that the ratio of students is only rising. Recent polls show that approximately 59% of students live in Ghent (in a dorm), while 36% commute from their home town and 6% live with their parents within the city (Mpiris, 2021). The exponential growth of student numbers has caused a growing concern for both themselves and other inhabitants of Ghent. As mentioned before, numerous students experience difficulties in finding suitable housing options. The applications for student homes far exceed the supply. Large private corporations rent out much quicker than before and traditional private dorms are harder to find. With this shortage, prices have also gone up. The average price of a dorm has almost doubled in 15 years, charging the renter €415 in 2020 compared to €234,70 in 2006 (Gentse studentenraad, 2006; Stad Gent, 2020). Even when taking inflation rates into account, this rise is exponential. Belgian students who cannot find a place in university dorms turn towards the private market. For international students, this forms an additional barrier as the market is often informal, in Dutch, and requires in-person visitations (Cordeels, 2021). These barriers are reflected in the statistics regarding private dorms, where international students are underrepresented.

Even when finding accommodation, 26% of students report to be unhappy with their living situation, mainly pointing towards the shortage on the market as the main culprit. Over a quarter of students reports to have had difficulties with their housekeeper, mainly due to poor housing conditions, late repairs or legal matters (Stad Gent, 2021). Consequently, students are looking for other possibilities. Co-housing with other students in family homes has become a popular and cheap housing option for students in Ghent. Living in a shared house is almost €40 cheaper than the general average of student housing. However, this ‘trend’ has left limited housing options for permanent inhabitants of Ghent, as more and more apartments and family homes become occupied by students. Local inhabitants are increasingly vocal against the exponential growth of students in the city, stating that the balance is lost (Poppelmonde, 2022).The city of Ghent has forbidden this sort of co-housing for students, with sanctions and regulations in place in order to save space for permanent inhabitants of Ghent, also called ‘Gentenaars’ (Stad Gent, 2020). Nonetheless, over 25% of international students and 21% of Belgian students still describe their housing situation as ‘co-housing’ in a shared apartment or family home (Mpiris, 2021), and an expected 10.000 students currently reside in this sort of ‘illegal’ setting (Matthys, 2021). To combat this shortage, the city of Ghent wants to increase the capacity of dorms with an additional 10.000 units (Het Nieuwsblad, 2021). However, with upcoming renovations for the existing homes (Lambert & Thiessen, 2021) and protests against the building of new homes in nature environments (Ysebaert, 2021), this expansion does not seem plausible in the near future.

**2.4 Inequality in the market**

A shortage of living units inherently causes inequality in any setting. Access to the market will become more difficult, prices will go up in relation to quality and home owners will become picky in who they allow in their properties. Obeng-Odoom (2012) looks at these problems in a context of the Australian student housing market. This highly saturated market is navigated by both homeland and international students, coming from all over the world. His findings are two-fold. In university accommodations, problems reported were minor and similar for both national and international students. This included reports of noise problems, personal conflicts and other miscellaneous things. However, in private accommodations, a different picture is drawn up. Although national and international students report similar problems, the scope is nowhere similar to each other. Although international postgraduate students made up only 31% of students at the university of Sydney in 2009, over 80% of housing complaints came from this group. For every complaint made by a homeland student, there are four made by international students. Complaints include difficulty to find housing, scams, wrongful ejection, contract breach or even no contract at all (Obeng-Odoom, 2012).

In Ghent, similar patterns were discovered: international students are highly underrepresented on the private market, with over half of students living in student homes or large-scale student housing. Within these university homes, satisfaction rates are similar among Belgian and international students. However, international students seem to experience quite some difficulties reaching the private market where they also report significantly lower satisfaction rates in comparison to Belgian students (Mpiris, 2021). This pattern suggests that there are structural causes at play, which disadvantage international students in the market. In the following section, I will attempt to uncover these structures through an extensive literary study and comparisons with the current state of the Ghent student housing market.

# 3. Theoretical framework

**3.1 Causes of inequality**

3.1.1 Spatial assimilation vs. ethnic stratification

In their 2008 study, Bolt and colleagues reflect on the Dutch housing market, and how minority ethnic groups navigate within it. They set out two theories that try to explain why minority ethnic groups face difficulties when finding suitable housing and how spatial segregation is at play. Spatial assimilation, a concept coined by the Chicago School and later developed by Massey and Denton (1985), sees this difficulty as temporary. As the length of stay of minority inhabitants increases, the specific difficulties that they encounter decrease. This occurrence is explained through socioeconomic mobility and acculturation. By living in the host country, ethnic minorities will become accustomed to the ways of living, language and housing market of their new-found home. They get accustomed to its specific ways of life and will become part of the culture. The longer they live in this new environment, the easier it will get to navigate (Bolt, Van Kempen & Van Ham, 2008; Massey & Denton, 1985). In contrast to the Spatial Assimilation Theory, the Ethnic Stratification Model is put forward. This model argues that regardless of integration and assimilation to the new culture, discriminatory acts and prejudice will remain an issue. Difficulties in finding housing might decrease for particular ethnic minorities who have stayed in the host country for longer periods of time, but they will never cease to exist (Bolt, Van Kempen & Van Ham, 2008).

Although Bolt and colleagues focused mainly on spatial segregation and the formal housing market, these theories provide fruitful ways in which I can approach the housing issue in Ghent. It provides a two-fold framework that might help to explain the housing issue: one that looks at the characteristics of internationals within the market, and one that looks at the impact of outsiders on the internationals within the market. Spatial assimilation points towards specific difficulties that international students face when first arriving in the new market, which solve themselves automatically after a certain amount of time. To uncover and define these difficulties, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital (1985) is used. Following Fang and Van Liempt (2018), the different concepts of capital set out a secondary framework to explain the temporary problems internationals face as described by the Spatial Assimilation Theory. For Bourdieu, different forms of capital explain how opportunities in society differentiate between individuals on the basis of knowledge, skills and social contacts. Through the concepts of Bourdieu, the theory of spatial assimilation becomes more tangible. The Ethnic Stratification Model partly accepts the assimilation idea of the former theory, but includes an aspect of discrimination. Both theories will be discussed in depth in the next section. I will first look at Bourdieu’s concept of capital, and how the lack thereof can heighten difficulties for international students. Afterwards, I will take a look at how discrimination can take place within a student housing market, and if this is the case in Ghent. In a final paragraphs, I will discuss additional structural barriers that internationals face, with regards to institutional problems, legal issues and other roadblocks in their path.

**3.1.2 Spatial assimilation and Bourdieu’s forms of capital and their application**

***‘Where young people come from, in terms of both their social class and their location, does have an impact in their experience of university’* (Antonucci, 2016, p. 51)**

**It is with this quote that Lorenza Antonucci tries to highlight the importance of the location where students come from, and how it changes their university experience. Although her book mainly focusses on economic and financial inequality, the quote does set the tone for a wide variety of inequalities that come with going to university. With this finding, she mentions the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and his well-known study of French society. Bourdieu found that it is not only economic capital, but rather a combination of social and cultural capital together with financial means that determines one’s position in social life. In his famous lectures at Collège de France in the early eighties, he defines forms of capital within society as *‘that which makes the games of society*** *—not  least,  the  economic  game— something  other  than  simple  games  of chance  offering  at  every moment  the  possibility  of  a miracle.’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 15).*

He continues by explaining how forms of capital influence the chances individuals get within society. He compares a world of perfect chance and opportunity with a game of roulette. In this game, one can win a large sum of money within an instant, providing the players of this game an opportunity to change their social status within seconds. With every new spin, the chances of winning are independent of the previous game. It is a game of perfect chance, where everyone has similar chances to win, regardless of previous rounds or the characteristics of players at the table. The concept of capital is what prevents society from being a game of roulette. Bourdieu defines capital as accumulated labour. It is a hidden force that is embedded in our social structures, that enables those who accumulate it to increase their chances. It is the principle that underlies the asymmetry in our societies. Capital needs to be accumulated and has a possibility to reproduce itself, making it very persistent once obtained. Bourdieu defines three main types of capital in his works: economic capital, social capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

**Economic capital as a form of social inequality has been put forward by economic theorists long before Bourdieu developed his theory. The idea that the finances one possesses, objects that are directly convertible into money, will influence their position in social space is widely accepted. Economic capital is also quite easily transferable, and can thus maintain inequality throughout generations. While Bourdieu agrees with the influence that economic capital can have on one’s position in social space, he also critiques the concept, as the strict sense in which economic theorists define it does not explain inequalities in society sufficiently (ibid.).**

**There seems to be quite some disagreement concerning the level of economic capital among international students. According to certain authors, international students are a financially privileged group, described as ‘migratory elite’ who enjoy a slightly higher socioeconomic status than the local students (**Musgrove, 1963; Windle & Nogueira, 2015; **Calvo, 2017). In order to obtain a VISA to study in Flanders, proof of financial means is required. As of March 2022, this consists of a minimum of €730 per month (StudyinFlanders, 2022). In theory, this presupposes that all incoming students have sufficient means to enter Belgium. However, in practice, this is unlikely the case for all. The minimum budget suggested contains just over half of the finances that are deemed necessary to fund a student life in Belgium. The average student living in student housing is expected to spend €14.103 in 2021 (VRT NWS, 2021a). International students are also not eligible for grants, unless they possess the Belgian nationality or their parents have worked and lived in Belgium for multiple years (Vlaanderen, 2020). On top of this, research reports that international students tend to forge these financial statements. In their 2016 research, Calder and colleagues interviewed international students in Canada, who are faced with a similar problem. One student that explained how they provide the necessary papers.**

*‘When they give you the visa they ask you do you have this much money, whatever it is, ten thousand dollars. . . . Who in [participant’s home country] has ten thousand dollars? . . . What do we do is . . . put money into an account from different people, provide the paper that says you have it, and then everybody takes it away so when you come here, you actually don’t have the money.’* (Calder et al., 2016, p. 101)

**In their 2021 study concerning the student housing markets in The Netherlands, Fang and Van Liempt come to similar conclusions. International students cannot simply be looked at as a homogenous group of wealthy students. Due to specific regulations and the distance from home, they often have to look towards alternative sources of funding, such a loans or savings (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018). Based upon these findings, it can be concluded that not all international students enjoy this migratory elite status, and at least some of them will likely not meet the standards for living a comfortable student life in Belgium. Poverty among students has been a widely discussed problem (see** Newton & Turale, 2000; Firfirey & Carolissen, 2010; Layton, 2015)**, and should be researched on the basis of nationality. However, for reasons of time constraint this research paper will not go into further depth with regards to economic capital. Measuring economic capital requires a much more in-depth research, with more delicate questions. The scope of this research did not allow this, and I will thus solely focus on social and cultural capital as forms of assimilation. These will be discussed in the following paragraphs.**

**Social capital is defined as ‘**the  aggregate  of  the  actual  or  potential  resources  which  are  linked to  possession  of  a  durable  network  of more  or less institutionalized relationships  of mutual  acquaintance  and  recognition’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). **In short, social capital is the environment we are in and the people we know. Membership of certain groups can have a large impact on the opportunities we are offered, and can back the members of this group up with a form of capital that produces advantages. These groups can vary from close, personal contacts to contacts forged by similar pathways, institutions or companies. Social capital is also transferable onto next generations, but is often less visible than economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). A clear example are legacy students at universities, where a last name can virtually guarantee a ticket into the top universities in the world.**

**In the context of international student housing, social capital mainly concerns the connections necessary in order to access the informal market (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018). Contrary to many Belgian students, international students cannot always rely on useful connections within the city. This is a vital aspect of finding a dorm in Ghent, as over 34% of students report receiving help from friends or family in Ghent during their search (Arteveldehogeschool, 2017). Social capital, and the theorized lack thereof among international students, could partly explain why international students are highly overrepresented in university dorms and underrepresented in the private market, as the first goes through formal channels, while the latter is mainly informal-based.**

**Cultural capital is the final form of capital that Bourdieu defines in his work. He defines three types of this capital. The first type, ‘the embodied state’, relates to any capital that is linked to the body. How we consume a painting, our dietary preferences and the hours we spend on physical activities are all embedded in our cultural capital. One can buy expensive machinery, and only need economic capital to do so, but in order to understand its workings, cultural capital is required. The way our bodies act co-define the amount of cultural capital we possess, and the advantages it will bring. The second type is called the ‘objectified state’, namely objects that possess a certain amount of cultural capital. These can include books, painting, media and writing. The objects we use and surround ourselves with also co-define our social capital. The third form, the ‘institutionalized state’, is what formalizes cultural capital through institutions and qualifications. Embodied and objectified cultural goods tend to be informal, as they do not require any accreditation. Cultural capital in the form of state-recognized diplomas is a method of formalizing cultural capital, and providing formal proof that one possesses the adequate qualities in order to receive the benefits (Bourdieu, 1986).**

**With regards to student housing, it is mainly the embodied state that has a clear impact on the ongoing processes. Fang and Van Liempt perfectly describe the need for cultural capital in a housing market as *‘****knowledge of housing-market practices as well as being ‘culturally compatible’ with the local housing context, for instance, by speaking the local language’* (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018, p. 823). International students often find themselves in less fortunate positions with regards to renting a home. At the start of the renting season, they might not always be in the country. This limits opportunities to join live viewings of properties and forces them to start their search via online platforms. They often have less knowledge about the housing market, and are consequently more susceptible to scams and overpriced dorms (Obeng-Odoom, 2021; Lambert & Thiessen, 2021). On top of this, they often lack ‘compatibleness’ with the local market. A lack of proficiency in the language, little knowledge on the possible platforms and a general lack of time to explore options are all possible barriers to finding suitable housing in the Ghent dorm market (Obeng-Odoom, 2012; Fang & van Liempt, 2021; O’Connor, 2015). O’Connor adds to this, stating that beside language, *whiteness* is another form of cultural capital that influences chances of renting decent housing. According to his research, native students in New Zealand carried significantly more positive attitudes towards European and North American students than they did towards Asian students. As the culture of the latter differs more substantially with the culture of New Zealand than cultures of other Western countries do, the attitudes towards Asian students were much less positive. In a student housing market, where landlords hold a large power over who they rent their accommodation to, favourable attitudes are of utmost importance. Understanding a culture that is relatively similar to that of the host country, and sharing certain bodily characteristics with native students can aid in creating more possibilities on the housing market (O’Connor, 2015). Similar findings were found by Hanassab in the 2006 US higher education landscape, where students from African and Middle Eastern descent experienced higher levels of racism than some of their international peers (Hanassab, 2006). Whiteness and knowledge of culture as a form of capital can thus improve the position of some international students, and create inequality within the group of international students, as it favours some and disadvantages others.

Multiple authors point towards a lack of economic, social and cultural capital as a partial explanation as to why international students have more trouble when finding a suitable place to live. **Social and cultural capital also provide a (partial) explanation for previous research outcomes suggesting a swifter moving pattern among international students. Once these students have spent a significant amount of time within the city and have gotten the opportunity to lay contacts themselves and acquire more cultural capital, they are able to move towards better accommodation (Bolt et al., 2008; Obeng-Odoom, 2012). According to Spatial Assimilation Theory, both cultural and social forms of capital can be vastly improved over time and will lower differences for international students once they have assimilated. However, the findings of O’Connor and Hanassab point towards another factor at play. While cultural capital in the form of language and cultural knowledge can be vastly improved in a few years, whiteness as a form of cultural capital will continuously cause inequality in the housing market, both between international and Belgian students, and within groups of international students. While problems with housing might decrease once international students have integrated within the city, the problems never fully disappear, as discrimination plays an integral part in housing processes.**

3.1.3 Discrimination

According to the theory of ethnic stratification, discrimination is an integral part of the housing market. This makes it difficult for foreign students to find housing, regardless of their economic status, social or cultural capital. Exclusion and discrimination within a housing market can be based upon a number of characteristics, including gender and sexual preference. For reasons of simplification, this study will focus mainly upon discrimination based upon ethnicity. Verhaeghe and Ghekiere (2020) uncover this type of discrimination in their study on the formal housing market in Ghent. By sending emails and chat messages through a real estate website, they found significant discrimination of non-Belgian ethnicities by real estate agents and private home owners based on the name of the prospect tenant. In the private market, a discrimination rate of 42% was noted (Verhaeghe & Ghekiere, 2020). Although the study gives a good first impression concerning the mentality of the housing market and the discrimination that takes place within it, it does not include student housing. As mentioned previously, the student housing market consists of very specific characteristics that can influence the level of discrimination that takes place within it. The market specifically designed for this type of housing thus requires a separate study.

Fang and Van Liempt carried out such research on the Dutch student market. Similar to the market in Ghent, the student housing market in Utrecht faces severe shortages. Dutch universities do not provide accommodation, but do inform students online about where they can find student housing in the city (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018). The most popular way of finding housing is through SSH, a company that provides an online portal with a collection of over 19.000 units across The Netherlands. The longer you have been on their waiting lists, the more chance you have of being invited to *hospiteeravonden*, meetings with current inhabitants of the building (Universiteit Utrecht, 2016; SSH, 2022). Although discrimination seems to be minimized during the first part of the process, it is during the *hospiteeravonden* that current inhabitants of the homes get to choose which candidate they find the ‘best fit’ for their student house. It is during these nights that international students report a number of problems. The first problem arises with distance. Many international students are only present in the country of studies a few weeks before the start of the first term. *Hospiteeravonden* limit their options of searching earlier, an option that most native students do have. On top of this, many international students reported cases of racism if they were invited to these nights (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018). Most international students were unable to find a room with the SHH system, and were forced to turn towards the private market. Similar to the market in Ghent, the private student housing market in Utrecht mainly goes through informal channels: Facebook groups and close contacts. A key in these processes is the landlord, who has a very direct influence over who rents the accommodation. They are much more involved in the renting process, often causing a power relationship between themselves and the tenant. Especially in a saturated market, landlords can choose whoever they believe to be the ‘best fit’ (Gray, 1983; Fang & Van Liempt, 2021). They have not received equity training, while most real estate agents have followed at least some diversity and anti-discrimination classes over the course of their education (HOGENT, 2022; AP hogeschool, 2022). Additionally, the behavior of the renter has a direct influence on the landlord, which can highly impact their opinions in the decision-making process. This can cause an increase of discriminatory practices. A presence of discriminatory practices combined with a lack of capital that certain international students likely possess, cause them to have significantly lower chances of obtaining proper housing. Some students end up in illegal housing practices, or stay with friends and family (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018).

Only one small-scale study has attempted to investigate whether or not there is discrimination within the student housing market in Belgium. Independent student magazine Veto created two fictitious profiles: one under the name of Ahmad Boulas and one under the name of Willem-Jan Paridaens. They sent out 20 emails under these names to the same landlords. Ahmad received 11 answers, while Willem-Jan received 14. On top of this, the replies received varied for the two profiles. Ahmad was told multiple times that the room had been rented, and was invited for a viewing only four times. Willem-Jan received 11 invitations (Delespaul, 2020). This research clearly shows the severity of discrimination on the student housing market. To my knowledge, no such research has been performed in Ghent. However, due to the similarity of the Belgian and Dutch market, I expect there to be similar experiences.

Building further onto the concept of whiteness as cultural capital (O’Connor, 2015), it can also be theorized that different groups of international students experience different levels of discrimination. Research of Martiniello and Verhaeghe on discrimination rates in Leuven, a comparable student city in Flanders, showed that discrimination rates are highest among male individuals with a Maghreb name, followed by male individuals of Nepalese and Sub-Saharan African origins (Martiniello & Verhaeghe, 2021). Bolt and colleagues shared similar findings in their research, where non-Western migrants faced considerable larger problems with regards to housing than Western migrants (Bolt et al., 2008). Fang and Van Liempt confirmed that students who possessed some form of social or cultural capital (such as knowledge of the market and language) on average reported less problems (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018). However, research confirming different levels of ethnic discrimination dependent on the origin of the international student could not be found.

3.1.4 Structural barriers for international students

Another important factor of finding housing are the structural barriers than come with being an international student. The city of Ghent and UGent have cooperated over the last few years in order to minimize these barriers. However, some of them continue to have an impact.

**A first barrier occurs due to specific VISA regulations, which subject international students to additional regulations. They are allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours a week during the academic year and cannot take up any work while during education-related activities (Study in Flanders, 2019). This can restrict them from working to pay for their studies (Obeng-Odoom, 2012). While Belgian students also have a limit (475 hour per year), this limit can be surpassed if the student decides earning more money is more beneficial than receiving child-support benefits (Student@Work, 2022). They also have no restrictions with regards to working during education-related activities.**

**Belgian students often opt for housing without domicile, as it provides a number of advantages (see examples in previous paragraphs). International students are not always able to do so, as they are obliged to register with the municipality. Due to increasing pressure from universities and student cities, the legal regulations for international students have recently changed. If the dorm of the student is specifically described as ‘a place of study’, international students can keep their domicile in their home country, while also enjoying the perks of student-specified regulations concerning housing (Stad Gent, 2021). This does raise questions with regards to the large number of illegal housing options in Ghent. If international students are not able to enter this part of the market due to legal concerns, a large chunk of housing options disappears. Another issue involves the home owners: are they willing to adapt their contracts in favour of international students?**

**A third barrier is the period of rent. Belgian students often reside in a student city for multiple years. This ensures the landlord that he or she will not have to look for new tenants for at least a couple of years. For international students, the period of stay is often much shorter. Due to exchange programs and international internships, they are often in town for only a couple of months. This requires a lot of flexibility from the side of the home owner, who has to deal with a multitude of renters each year. Tied with this is the refusal of subletting. A few years ago, it was considered illegal to sublet your room without the written permission of your land lord. This prohibited many Belgian students of subletting a room to an incoming students while they went on their international experience. However, legal laws have changed in 2019, and students going on an outward exchange can now legally sublet their room to incoming students (De Rouck, 2018). While this change in regulation does provide a larger offer of short-term accommodation, this does not necessarily imply that international students benefit from it. The shortage of the market also increasingly pushes local students towards more short-term accommodation options.**

**Despite the lowering of structural barriers due to the implementation of regulation specifically targeted towards student housing, it is clear that they have not disappeared. Alongside discriminatory practices and issues related to market-specific forms of capital, it is important to take these barriers into account.**

**3.2 Consequences**

3.2.1 Consequences for the tenant

Experienced difficulties and discrimination on the housing market are shown to have a significant impact on those affected, both mentally and physically. In their interviews, Fang and Liempt (2018) found a very high and continuous emotional impact on the search for housing among international students. Students reported feeling unwelcome in their new city, unsupported and misunderstood. The long search often has negative consequences on their mental health, motivation and performance in school (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018).

Currie and colleagues set out a study looking at the physical consequences of racially motivated housing discrimination among indigenous Canadian college students. They compared the Allostatic Load, from here on referred to as ‘AL’, between indigenous students and their peers. ‘AL’ is defined medically as ‘the cumulative burned of chronic stress and life events’ (Guidi, Lucente, Sonino & Fava, 2020). For indigenous students reporting discriminatory behavior on the housing markets, the AL experienced was almost double compared to the experience of non-indigenous students. They showed a significantly larger impact on the immune system, but also cardiovascular, neuroendocrine and metabolic systems (Currie, Motz & Copeland, 2020). In a complementary study, Motz and Currie also found mental consequences. The frequency with which indigenous students had experienced racial discrimination on the housing market had a direct effect in the frequency of PTSD symptoms (short for post-traumatic stress disorder), with every additional discriminating encounter on a four point scale increasing the PTSD score with 5.4 points (Motz & Currie, 2019). PTSD can cause severe emotional distress, anxiety and nightmares (Pacella, Hruska & Delahanty, 2013; Mayo Clinic, 2018).

3.2.2 Consequences for the city and the market as a whole

On top of the consequences mentioned for the individuals experiencing the difficulties of finding accommodation, the lack of housing and the difficulties that internationals face also have an impact on the city and the market as a whole. As mentioned before, international students often end up in illegal settings due to a lack of housing (Fang & Van Liempt, 2018). If discriminatory practices mainly impact non-Belgian students in a saturated market, and these students also lack the necessary cultural and social capital, Belgian students who have the option of commuting from home will find housing more easily than those coming from the other side of the world. With an increasing amount of Belgian students opting for student housing in the city, this can cause multiple problems (De Leur & Buekenhoudt, 2022). As international students coming from abroad are forced to find accommodation in Ghent, the discrimination and difficulties reported will not only cause more scarcity in the market, but also an enlargement of illegal practices. In the context of Ghent, where over 21% of Belgian students and 25% of international students already live in illegal circumstances (Mpiris, 2021), it is vital that international students are oriented towards legal housing options.

**3.3 Conclusions and hypotheses**

Do international students face more difficulties when looking for student housing in Ghent? To answer this question, previous theoretical findings were discussed as a basis for new research. In multiple settings, the research question was confirmed. International students reported higher levels of difficulty when searching for accommodation, and also reported higher levels of dissatisfaction concerning their housing. Two possible explanations were put forward to explain these phenomena: Spatial Assimilation Theory and Ethnic Stratification Model. The first model puts the source of difficulties with the student itself. International face specific difficulties that will diminish over time, due to the assimilation to the new culture. These difficulties were specified through Bourdieu’s concepts of capital. Upon arrival, international students will likely possess less capital than other students, which will impact their search. However, capital is dynamic and can be acquired over time indicating a possibility of a lowering of difficulties in the future. A second theory, Ethnic Stratification Model, conforms with the first theory to a certain extent, but adds an important factor: discrimination. According to this theory, while certain levels of assimilation can occur through the acquiring of capital, difficulties will never disappear due to factors of discrimination. International students will always be treated as outsiders, regardless of the temporality of some problems they might experience. This will continuously influence their chances of obtaining housing in Ghent. A final factor to mention are structural barriers. These are institutional or legal barriers that internationals face when looking for housing. This can include laws regulating their work hours and VISA obligations. These are also important to take into account.

Based upon the found literature, a factor of discrimination is assumed. For this reason, the research design will be built upon the Ethnic Stratification Model, and is two-fold. A first focus looks at the ‘temporary difficulties’ in the form of capital. If international students have less knowledge of the housing market and do not speak Dutch, their cultural capital will be lower than local students. Similarly, if international students do not have the correct social ties to acquire housing in Ghent, their low level of social capital will make it more difficult to find housing. A second panel of the research design will focus on discrimination, and how this influences the search for housing in Ghent. Based upon this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses can be formed:

1. International students face significantly more difficulties than local students when looking for student accommodation in Ghent.
2. Difficulties in finding student accommodation can be partly attributed to a lack of social and cultural capital.
3. Difficulties in finding student accommodation can be partly attributed to discrimination present on the housing market.
4. Those experiencing higher levels of difficulties and discrimination will report lower levels of happiness and positive experiences compared to those who do not face these difficulties.

The conceptual model looks as follows:



# Methodology

**4.1 Methodology implications**

Due to the unique type of market that this study focusses on, there were some specific implications with regards to methodology. Although the formal housing market of Ghent had been elaborately studied by professor Verhaeghe and colleagues, this cannot be said about the student housing market. The informality of the market places many of the activities in an informal setting, often through social media and/or personal contacts. Detecting inequalities in those spheres requires a much more elaborate study, with an experimental design that includes fake social media platforms and a qualitative approach in the personal spheres of the renters. However, due to time constraints as well as uncertainties with regards to COVID-19, a different approach was opted for. As the student market in Ghent had not been elaborately studied before, a quantitative approach in which a general situation of the topic could be drawn proved to be the best fit for this research. In a first attempt to map out the problems and provide the reader with a general overview of the issues, a survey-based methodology was ideal. This could provide a base for future, more elaborate research while also drawing preliminary conclusions with regards to the topic.

**4.2 Survey specifics**

4.2.1 Survey build and structure

On the basis of the literature review, a 20-question survey was set up and later distributed through various channels. The survey was entirely anonymous, and would only be used with regards to educational purposes. It was built up on the basis of four main building blocks, all of which will be discussed in the following section.

The first block included personal details. This includes age, gender, country of birth and ethnicity, as well as their current institute of higher education. All of this information could later be used to understand the constitution of our sample, as well as the usage of control variables in the model. At the end of this block, respondents were asked to indicate their level of Dutch on a scale ranging from non-existent to mother tongue. This variable did not only provide me with personal information, but also constituted as an important measure with regards to the cultural capital the respondent possessed in the context of the Ghent student housing market. A second block gauged at the respondents’ history of student housing. They were asked about their educational history in the city of Ghent, as well as their moving pattern since residing here. This history would allow me to test the literature findings suggesting an assimilation process after residing in a city for a longer amount of time. A third block looked at the current student housing, including the costs, the type of accommodation and the way in which they found their current home. This block also looked at the help these students received when looking for housing. Did they receive help from friends or family? From their institute of higher education? From their hairdresser? The answer(s) to these questions would allow me to draw a picture of the social capital that the student currently possesses: how their personal contacts helped them in finding housing in the city. A final block asked the respondents about their personal experience living in student housing in Ghent. A five-point Likert scale was introduced, ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. The respondents were asked about their experience when looking for housing, as well as their experience with their current form of housing and their relationship with their landlord. Is the respondent happy with the location of their current dorm? Are they happy with the price? Do they feel good in Ghent? With this data, findings could exceed the focus on merely finding housing, and also draw a general picture of the experience after this stage. The final block also gauged as the specific difficulties that the respondents faced with regards to finding appropriate housing. Respondents were asked if they had ever experienced difficulties when finding housing, and those replying ‘yes’ were asked to rate these difficulties from 0 to 100. On top of this, respondents were asked to share their experiences with regards to (ethnic) discrimination. Based upon the Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionaire (PEDQ-CV) created by Brondolo et al. in 2005, a shortened questionnaire was created to gauge at the ethnic discrimination as experienced by respondents (Brondolo et al., 2005). From this newly adapted questionnaire, nine items have been selected to uncover the experience of ethnic discrimination within the context of the Ghent housing market. These items measured the experience of students with regards to how they have been treated, and included topics such as courtesy, honesty and trust. The questionnaire was concluded by asking those who wanted to participate in a contest for rewards for their email addresses, and a thank you message for all who had reached the end of the survey.

4.2.2 Survey distribution

The survey was built in Qualtrics, and translated into both English and Dutch in an attempt to reach a broad audience. In order to attract enough respondents, three rewards would be distributed among the participants in the form of cinema vouchers and vouchers for online stores. Sampling methods included mainly a combination of voluntary response sampling and a snowballing method (McCombes, 2019). In a first stage, the survey was shared in the personal spheres of the researcher and on the main social media pages with regards to student housing in Ghent. These included mainly Facebook pages such as ‘Te huur: kot in Gent’, ‘Op kot in Gent’ and ‘Rooms, flats and apartments for students in Ghent’. In a second stage, internationally-oriented student associations were contacted in an attempt to reach their members. Associations who gave a positive response included the Vietnamese Student Association (VINASAG), the Indonesian Student Association Ghent (InSAG), Internationaal Konvent among others. The survey was also shared in more general Facebook groups oriented at international students in Ghent, in an attempt to increase the international response. For similar reasons, the International Support Team of Ghent university was contacted and asked to share the survey on their social media pages. In a third stage, reminders were sent out to all contacted individuals and associations who had failed to respond, and the survey was shared again in the main social media groups. After a week, the survey response was paused and the data was downloaded onto an SPSS dataset.

**4.3 Sample**

The data collection took place during the first weeks of April 2022. The sample of the dataset included 427 responses. After removing preview responses and respondents who had indicated they were not currently students in Ghent residing in student housing, 350 valid responses remained. Of these respondents, 69 participants indicated having a non-Belgian nationality. Compared to the 273 Belgians in the data, international students thus represent 19.7% of the sample. This number exceeds the population percentage of international students at Ghent university during the academic year of 2019-2020, which was equal to 14% (UGent, 2019). Note that statistics of later years could not be used, as the COVID-19 pandemic halted a majority of foreign exchange possibilities. The sample includes a large majority of female respondents, with 279 women compared to 61 men (79.7% in comparison to 17.4%). This can be partially explained due to the personal spheres of the researcher and the general oversupply of female students in socially oriented tracks. The age of the respondents mostly follows what is considered a traditional age range for students, with a relatively small group of older outliers. The large majority of respondents studies at the University of Ghent (70.6%), with 13.7% and 13.1% of students studying at HOGENT and Arteveldehogeschool respectively. Part of the explanation for this large imbalance is attributed to the personal sphere of the researcher, as well as the large differences in international student numbers per institute. As the University of Ghent enjoys a favorable international reputation, their international student numbers are significantly higher than those in the other higher education institutions in Ghent. As this research was specifically directed at attracting international students, it comes as no surprise that students of the University of Ghent are overrepresented. None of the variables in the dataset showed large numbers of missing, which allows for a continuation of the research.

**4.4 Variable construction and descriptive statistics**

4.4.1 Exogenous variables

*International student*

In the survey, respondents were asked to provide their country of birth. In the dataset, 37 different nationalities were noted. The data was recoded into a numeric variable, including 37 categories sorted in an alphabetical order. For ease of interpretation, a dummy variable was later created where zero equals ‘non-international’ and one equals ‘international’. A total of 274 respondents indicated Belgium to be their country of origins, while 69 indicated to have a foreign country of origins. This translates to 19.7% of the sample being an international student.

*Studying history*

A second exogenous variable gauges at the years students have spent studying in Ghent. As different forms of capital can be acquired or lost over time, it is important to include a timebound variable to look at the impact of the length of stay on the social and cultural capital acquired. The variable of studying history asks respondents how long they have been studying in Ghent. The scale ranges from one to five, with one equal to ‘less than one year’ and five equal to ‘more than four years’. Descriptive statistics show that a majority of respondents have been studying in Ghent for less than one year (133 respondents or 38.8%). The frequencies lower with every additional year, with 20.1% of respondents studying in Ghent between one and two years, 18.7% between two and three years, 10.5% between three and four years and 12% more than four years.

*Moving history*

A third and final exogenous variable includes the amount of times that students have moved housing since coming to Ghent. As moving houses likely increases knowledge with regards to the housing market, and also increases contacts around the city, this variable can prove to exert an important influence on the amount of difficulties one faces when looking for student accommodation in Ghent. It is a metric variable ranging from zero to seven, with a mean of 0.72 and a standard deviation of 1.057. This indicates that many of the respondents have not moved at all, or have only moved a few times. As a majority of students have indicated to be first-year students, this is not a surprising find.

4.4.2 Endogenous variables

*Social Capital scale*

To measure social capital, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they had received help when looking for accommodation, and to specify which channel(s) had helped them obtain their housing. They were presented with five answer categories: (1) Yes, from friends/family who live in Ghent, (2) Yes, from my higher education institute in Belgium, (3) Yes, from my higher education institution in my home country (if applicable), (4) Yes, other and (5) No, I did not receive any help. Multiple answers were possible. This data was later summed to create a scale in which every value equals the numbers of social ties used to find housing. The scale ranges from zero to two. Over 58% of respondents indicated to have received no help at all during their search. This is remarkable, as the majority of the student market is not run through formal channels. A total of 40.3% of respondents indicated having one source of help during their search, while 1.1% indicated having two. No respondent had more than two social ties helping them in their search.

*Prejudice and discriminatory acts*

As mentioned in previous paragraphs, nine items with regards to housing were selected from the adapted Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionnaire (PEDQ-CV). Based on their theory, these items would construct a scale that indicated the level of ethnic discrimination respondents went through. The following steps were undertaken to construct this scale: first, a Cronbach’s Alpha reliability test was run. This to confirm that the items measuring the core concept of discrimination do in fact show internal consistency. The Cronbach’s Alpha is equal to 0.713, with all items contributing similarly towards this outcome. This value is acceptable, indicating that a scale could be constructed out of the sum of the following items: within the context of the Ghent student housing market… (1) Have you ever been treated with less courtesy than other people? (2) Have others hinted that you are dishonest or cannot be trusted? (3) Have people who speak a different language made you feel like an outsider? (4) Have others made you feel like an outsider who does not fit in because of your dress, speech, or other characteristics related to your ethnicity? (5) Have others ignored you or not paid attention to you? (6) Have people not trusted you? (7) Have others hinted that you must not be clean? (8) Has it been hinted that you must be lazy? and (9) Do you feel you have ever been treated unfairly?. The scale was coded so that higher values indicated higher levels of experienced discrimination. The scale ranges from zero to eight, with an average of 1.03 and a standard deviation of 1.53. This indicates that the majority of respondents had a very low discrimination experience. This is expected, as many of the respondents were ‘white/Caucasian’, the traditional and biggest group of ethnicities in Flanders.

*Experience difficulties*

This categorical variable divides respondents based upon the following question: ‘Have you experienced difficulties with finding your current student accommodation in Ghent?‘. Answers were sorted in the following categories: (1) Yes, I have experienced difficulties with finding my current accommodation, (2) No, but I have experienced trouble with finding accommodation in the past and (3) No, I have never experienced difficulties. A large majority of students has experienced difficulties in their housing history as a student in Ghent, with 234 respondents belonging in either category one or two. This translates to 73.1% of our respondents experiencing difficulties. Over 60.6% of respondents faced these difficulties with regards to their current housing.

*Level of difficulties*

This scale-type variable shows the self-rated level of difficulty that respondents believed they faced when looking for housing in Ghent, ranging from 0 to 100. The variable was restricted to only those who responded to have faced difficulties either in the past or in the present. A total of 234 respondent had already experienced difficulties, and were asked to self-rate these struggles. The average was equal to 66.96, with a standard deviation of 18.88. This shows that once respondents felt like they had experienced difficulties, they believed these difficulties to be relatively high. The standard deviation does nuance this finding, as the indicated level of difficulty does seem to diverge quite a bit within this group of respondents.

*Type of dorm*

Based upon the adapted categorization of Mpiris, this categorical variable was created. Respondents were asked to indicate in which type of student housing they were currently residing. There were five answer options: (1) Classic dorm on the private market, (2) Student home provided by the university/college, (3) Co-housing with others in a house/apartment, (4) Large-scale student housing, not related to university/college and (5) Other (can include living on your own, hospita-living, etc.). A large majority of students (56%) live in a classic private dorms. Co-housing is the next most popular option, with 18% of students residing in this type of housing. This is followed by large-scale student housing that is not related to a university or college (10.6%) and student homes (9.4%). Less than 6% of respondents have other living arrangements. Traditional dorms on the private market remain by far the most popular option.

4.4.3 Items for latent variables

*Level of Dutch*

A first latent variable gauges at the level of cultural capital respondents possess. This variable includes the level of Dutch of the respondent as a possible form of this capital. The respondents were asked to rate their level of Dutch. For ease of interpretation, the variable was recoded to the following order: (1) Non-existent/moderate, (2) Sufficient, (3) Good, (4) Fluent and (5) Mother tongue. As can be expected, over 82% of respondents indicated Dutch to be their mother tongue. This falls in line with previous descriptive statistics relating to ethnicity and country of birth. Those who indicated that Dutch was not their mother tongue consequently rated their level of the language very low: 41 respondents (12.3%) indicating a non-existent or moderate level. Only 1.2 to 2.4% of respondents believed their level of Dutch to be sufficient, good or fluent.

*Experience: knowledge*

A second item looking at cultural capital includes the amount of knowledge students felt they had before entering the Ghent student housing market. Respondents were asked to rate the following statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’: ‘I had sufficient knowledge of the student housing market before moving to Ghent’. Interestingly, only 2.8% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement, indicating that there is a lack of knowledge relating to the housing market among newcomers. A total of 14.6% strongly disagreed with the statement, 38.8% somewhat disagreed, 23.3% neither agreed nor disagreed and 20.5% somewhat agreed.

*EXP1-EXP6*

Six items measure different aspects of the personal experience respondents had with regards to housing in Ghent. Respondents were asked to respond to statements through a five-point Likert scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The following statements were presented to them: ‘I had a pleasant experience looking for accommodation in Ghent’ (EXP1), ‘I had sufficient housing options to choose from before I made my decision’ (EXP2), ‘I am happy with the costs of my current accommodation’ (EXP3), ‘I am happy with the location of my current accommodation’ (EXP4), ‘I have a good relationship with my landlord’ (EXP5) and ‘I feel good in Ghent’ (EXP6). Descriptives for EXP1 and EXP2 once again lay bare the struggles that most students face when looking for housing in Ghent. Over 49% of students either disagree or strongly disagree with the first statement, while over 79% disagree or strongly disagree with the second one. This negative experience does seem to turn around when asking about their current accommodation: 48.4% of students agree or strongly agree that they are happy with the cost of their current accommodation, 80.1% agree or strongly agree that they are happy with the location of their current accommodation and 55% of students agree or strongly agree that they have a good relationship with their landlord. On top of this, over 83% of students agree or strongly agree with the fact that they feel good in Ghent. The frustrating task of finding housing as a student does not seem to spoil the fun for long afterwards.

**4.5 Research design and statistical technique**

To test all of the formed hypotheses via the collected data, two sets of tests will be used. The first set of tests will include bivariate statistics. Through these bivariate statistics, I will first try to further explore the data by including cross tabs and t-tests. Afterwards, I will test whether or not international students indicated a higher level of difficulties when finding housing via an independent samples t-test. A second set of tests includes Structural Equation Modelling. Structural Equation Modelling is a technique often used in sociology, in an attempt to test the three remaining theoretical assumptions through latent variables. By combining the techniques of pathway analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, SEM can uncover both how sets of variables define a latent construct and how these latent variables relate to one another. This technique will show how well the theoretical assumptions made via the literature review fit the collected data, and will uncover the strength of relationships between inserted variables (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004; Statistics Solutions, 2021). By opting for this model, multiple mediating effects could be added to the model at once and the latent variables of cultural capital and personal experience could be added through confirmatory factor analysis. This allows me to create an all-inclusive model, in which multiple hypotheses can be tested at once. It also allows me to uncover indirect effects, as well as direct and total effects.

# Results

**5.1 Bivariate statistics**

Before commencing the bivariate calculations necessary to either accept or reject the hypotheses, some additional tests were run in order to compare the data of current respondents to the data presented by Mpiris in 2021. This comparison will lay bare any major changes with regards to the student housing trends in Ghent. A first bivariate calculation looks at the division of students across the different types of student housing in Ghent. Similar to research of Mpiris, there are large differences between international and local students. Over 66% of local students stay in classic dorms on the private market, while only 14.9% of international students live in this type of accommodation. In student homes, this is the exact opposite, with only 3.7% of local students staying there as opposed to 32.8% international students. 14.3% of local students and 32.8% of international students co-house, which is an illegal way of residing as a student in Ghent. 11.8% of local students are in large-scale student housing, and 6% of internationals also reside in this type of housing. These findings perfectly align with Mpiris findings and confirm that international students face difficulties when housing is not provided through official (university-related) channels. In terms of pricing, the average in this dataset is much higher than the number provided by Mpiris. While the average student paid €415 in 2021, this has now risen to €475.82. Only student homes provided by the university and classic dorms on the private market are below this average. Co-housing on the other hand has become much more expensive, scoring below average cost in 2021 and scoring above it in 2022. This can be partially explained by the rising prices for gas and electricity, which often directly impacts renters in co-housing projects more than a traditional renter. Despite the high percentage of international students living in student homes, the other forms of housing seem to have a big influence on their monthly rent. International students on average pay around €70 more than local students. This hints not only towards internationals living in more expensive types of housing, but also towards higher prices for internationals in ‘traditional’ types of student accommodation. The shift that is observed between the data of Mpiris and the current dataset is worrying, as international students seem to be disproportionately impacted by rising prices and have to find increasingly creative solutions to find housing in the city.

To explore further in which other ways international students differ from local students, three additional bivariate calculations were made. In a first bivariate calculation, three metric variables were compared on the basis of internationality. Through an independent samples t-test, the age of respondents, how many times they had moved since coming to Ghent and how long they had been a student in the city were tested against the created dummy variable of nationality. For international students, the average age was equal to 25.62, the average times the respondent has moved is equal to 1.07 and the average time they have spent studying in Ghent is equal to 1.67. For non-international students, the average age amounted to 20.31, the average moving count was 0.63 and the mean years spent studying in Ghent was 2.54. In all cases, the Levene’s test for Equality of Variances was significant, indicating that equal variances could not be assumed. Based upon this result, the three outcomes were significant, indicating that international students are significantly older than non-international students (p<0.001), they have also significantly moved more times than local students have (p=0.014) but they have on average spent less time studying in Ghent than non-international students (p<0.001).

A second bivariate statistic compares the categorical ‘experienced difficulties’-variable between international and non-international students. For this, a simple crosstab was used. This crosstab once again confirmed the high difficulties when looking for accommodation, both for international and local students. Although local students did seem to have more difficulty looking for their current accommodation (62.2% of locals in comparison to 54.5% of internationals), they showed lower percentages with regards to difficulties in the past (10.6% of locals in comparison to 19.7% of internationals). Likely, this is due to the age gap that has been discussed above. International students are significantly older than local students, and have significantly moved more times than local students have. This makes their current search easier, but their initial search is harder than that of non-international students.

To confirm the latter assumption, an additional independent samples t-test was run between the dummy variable of internationality and the level of difficulties respondents indicated to have encountered. The mean level of difficulties for local students was equal to 65.68, while that of international students was equal to 71.84. The Levene’s test for Equality of Variances is insignificant (p=0.110), indicating that equal variances are assumed. Based on this result, the independent samples t-test is significant (p=0.042). International students have significantly higher levels of self-rated difficulties in comparison to local students.

**5.2 Assumptions**

Before continuing with the research, the assumptions for statistical analyses are checked. First, possible influential respondents are identified through the Cook’s D test. Respondents with a high level of influence on the dataset are identified through the Cook’s D value. All responses below a value of one are deemed non-influential. Through the graphic representation of the Cook’s D values, no responses were found to be problematic for the analysis. The graphic representation (in the form of a scatterplot) can be found in the annex. A second assumption includes homoskedasticity. To rule out heteroskedasticity, scatterplots of all residuals and endogenous variables were requested. All these scatterplots can be observed in the annex. No heteroskedasticity was found. A third assumption looks at the linearity of the data, by requesting a Loess test. The graphic results of this test can be found in the annex, and the results confirm a linear relation between the observed and expected values. The next assumption is autocorrelation, which can be tested through the Durbin and Watson statistic. This statistic uses a value of two as a perfect model, indicating no autocorrelation. As a cut-off point, all values below one and above three are considered problematic. For the selected variables, the Durban Watson statistic is equal to 1.705. This confirms an absence of autocorrelation. The next assumption is multicollinearity, which can be checked through the collinearity diagnostics. As a rule of thumb, any VIF-value higher than ten and any tolerance value below 0.10 is problematic. For the selected variables, this is not the case. The table in the annex confirms that no problematic multicollinearity was found. As a final assumption, the normal distribution of the residuals was checked. Via the calculated histogram which can be found in the annex, it is clear that the residuals are normally distributed. As all the assumptions are now checked and approved, the statistical analyses can continue.

**5.3 Multivariate statistics**

Based upon the literature review and the outcomes of the bivariate statistics, the following model was constructed:



Before running the Structural Equation Model, one additional assumption has to be tested: the identification of the model. Model identification is an important condition of running a SEM, with only over and just-identified models being suitable for analysis. Under identified models (models with more parameters to be estimated than parameters known) cannot be used in SEM. With 44 identified parameters, and 33 parameters to be estimated, this model is overidentified with 11 degrees of freedom. The model can safely be run.

Before interpreting results, the model fit has to be taken into account. There is much discussion among researchers which value accurately describes the model fit of a structural equation model (see Hu & Bentler, 2000; Lei &Wu, 2007; Ullman & Bentler, 2012) . I will discuss the most commonly used ones. Chi-Square (X²) calculates the difference between the observed and reproduced variance/covariance matrix. A significant chi-square is a first indication towards an appropriate model fit. In this model, Chi-Square is equal to 24,337 and the p-value is equal to 0.011. A second goodness of fit index is the root mean square error of approximation, or RMSEA. Once again, there is some discussion with regards to the outcome of this measure, but generally a threshold of 0.6 or below is considered an acceptable outcome. In the model, RMSEA is equal to 0.059. A third measure is the comparative fit index (CFI), which makes a comparison between the constructed model and the worst possible model one could have constructed. The threshold is 0.9, with values above that deemed appropriate. In this model, CFI is equal to 0.979. A final measure I will be discussing is the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). This is an adaptation of the CFI and also uses the same threshold (>0.9). The model has a TLI value of 0.931. Based upon these fit indices, the model fit can be labelled as appropriate in terms of the analysis. The results can now safely be interpreted.

Afbeelding met tekst

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Two significant effects were found when discussing the SEM. Both confirm the hypotheses with regards to the level of discrimination and cultural capital among international students in Ghent. International students face more prejudice and discriminatory acts related to housing than non-international (p<0.001) and have lower rates of cultural capital (p<0.001). However, neither of these findings significantly impact the level of difficulties respondents indicated facing. Likely, both international and non-international students face many difficulties. Although a small difference was found in the bivariate statistics section (self-rated difficulty levels of 65.68 out of 100 for local students and 71.84 out of 100 for international students), this difference is relatively small and only slightly significant (p=0.042). No significant effects were found with regards to social capital. How long a student has lived in Ghent and how many times they have moved has no significant effect on the cultural or social capital one possesses. This refutes the Theory of Spatial Assimilation, and confirms that difficulties arise on the basis of other characteristics than simply temporary issues.

To delve deeper into the effect that the significant variables have on the experience and life of international students, an additional model was run. Two latent variable were added, one measuring the personal experience that respondents had when looking for accommodation in Ghent and one measuring their personal experience living in Ghent. The first latent variable contains two items, both measuring a part of the experience related to finding housing. The second latent variable consists of four items, all measuring a part of the experience related to living in Ghent in their current accommodation. All items are metric five-point Likert scales ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Higher values signify a more pleasant experience. As the length of being a student and the number of times a respondent has moved did not significantly impact their cultural and social capital, these variables were taken out of the equation. Similarly, all hypothesized relations that were deemed insignificant in the previous model were now taken out. Before running the model, the model identification was once again checked. With 90 identified items and 44 parameters to be estimated, I can continue by checking the model fit indices. These were the following: chi-square was equal to 83,257 with a probability level of 0.001. The RMSEA was equal to 0.048, the CFI to 0.953 and the TLI to 0.920. Thus, the model is suitable for interpretation.

Afbeelding met tekst

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

As expected, being an international student has a once again a significant effect on the levels of discrimination experienced and the cultural capital that one has. With regards to the experience searching for housing, an additional significant effect was noted. The level of discrimination one experiences has a significant effect on the personal experience searching for housing, with higher levels of discrimination predicting lower levels of pleasant experience (p=0.004). Although no direct effect was found between internationality and experience searching, the two direct effects from internationality to discrimination, and discrimination to experience searching cause an indirect effect between being an international student and the level of pleasant experience one has when looking for housing. In other words, higher levels of discrimination negatively mediate the relation between being an international student and having a pleasant experience related to finding housing in Ghent. Similarly, a significant effect was found between the level of difficulties one experiences and the personal experience one has when finding housing: increased difficulties predict a lower positive experience regardless of ethnicity (p<0.001). Interestingly, relations change when looking at the experience students have in their current housing. In contrast to the experience looking for housing, international students have a significantly more positive experience than local students when it comes to their current housing (cost, location, landlord and general wellbeing in Ghent) with p=0.043. Here, social capital also plays a role. Higher levels of social capital also indicate a more positive experience living in Ghent (p=0.045).

# Conclusion and discussion

This paper set out to examine the experience of international students on the Ghent student housing market, and how different forms of capital and experiences of discrimination influence this experience. By means of a survey that was distributed through various online platforms, the experience of both local and international students with regards to finding student housing in Ghent were looked at, as well as the help they had received in the process and additional compositional data. Through the statistical software program of SPSS, a dataset was created with 350 respondents. Findings suggest that housing patterns and trends diverge greatly between international and local students. While local students reside almost exclusively in private dorms, international students are overrepresented in student homes and co-housing projects. International students also pay more, with a mean difference of over €70 per month. International students thus seem to have a more difficult time finding housing through informal channels, and also pay more than local students in the private market. Based upon the theoretical framework, the four following hypotheses were tested:

**H1: International students face significantly more difficulties than local students when looking for student accommodation in Ghent.**

This hypothesis was tested by running an independent samples t-test. A significant difference was found between international and local students with regards to the self-rated difficulties finding housing on the Ghent student housing market. Internationals believe their difficulties to be higher than local students. The hypothesis is thus confirmed.

**H2: Difficulties in finding student accommodation can be partly attributed to a lack of social and cultural capital.**

In this dataset, international students possess significantly lower levels of cultural capital. They do not possess appropriate language skills to enter the market, and do not have sufficient knowledge of its peculiarities to navigate it. However, this lack of capital does not seem to influence their difficulties on the market in a significant way. Their lack of knowledge and language skills do not significantly influence the difficulties they experience. Social capital did not differ significantly based on internationality, and also had no significant impact on the difficulties faced. The hypothesis is thus rejected, as cultural and social capital are no causal factors in the self-rated level of difficulties students face.

**H3: Difficulties in finding student accommodation can be partly attributed to discrimination present on the housing market.**

International students do encounter significantly more discrimination and prejudice when entering the student housing market than local students do. The adapted scale measuring discrimination related to Ghent student housing confirmed that international students deal more with discriminatory opinions and acts than non-international students do. This indicates that discrimination is taking place on the Ghent student housing market. However, the level of discriminatory experience does not significantly impact the self-rated level of difficulties. Those who have been through discriminatory experiences do not report significantly higher levels of difficulty finding housing. The hypothesis is rejected, as no evidence was found suggesting that difficulties finding housing can be (partially) attributed to discrimination.

**H4: Those experiencing higher levels of difficulties and discrimination will report lower levels of happiness and positive experiences compared to those who do not face these difficulties.**

To test this hypothesis, an additional SEM was run including two additional latent variables: personal experience when looking for student housing in Ghent and personal experience living in current student accommodation in Ghent. It was confirmed that those experiencing higher levels of discrimination have a less positive experience when looking for housing that those who experienced lower levels of discrimination. Similarly, those experiencing higher levels of difficulty when looking for housing also reported more negative experiences regardless of nationality. Interestingly, the effect of both variables on the living experience in current accommodation was insignificant. The hypothesis is thus partly confirmed: individuals experiencing more difficulties and/or more discrimination report a less positive experience when looking for housing, but not in relation to their current accommodation.

Conform literature, both discrimination and cultural capital differed on the basis of internationality. Respondents with an international background suffered from more cases of discrimination in relation to the housing market, and possessed lower levels of cultural capital than local students did. However, these variables did not have a significant effect on the level of difficulties experienced. This did not strike with previous research, as the Ethnic Stratification Model believes both discrimination and low levels of cultural and social capital to be culprits of internationals facing more difficulties. Bivariate statistics brought more clarity, and showed that although there was a difference noted in level of difficulty, this difference was relatively small and only just significant. Additional investigation of the data further explained this phenomenon: there is an occurrence of oversaturation. Every statistical outcome pointed towards the same finding: finding student housing in Ghent is a nearly impossible task, regardless of nationality. Despite literature findings stating that a saturated market comes with more opportunities for discrimination, I theorize that after a certain level of (over)saturation, inequalities start to decrease once more. While international students face similar problems as before, local students will also become increasingly exposed to difficulties when finding housing, and both groups will likely grow closer in the process. This provides an important addition to the literature findings, suggesting that once a threshold has been reached the impact of discriminatory behavior and lack of cultural capital on one’s difficulties becomes insignificant. Important to note is that this does not mean international students face less difficulties, it simply means that local students face these difficulties as well.

No proof for a time-bound assimilation process was found, with both the years of study in Ghent and the times moved while residing in the city having no impact on the cultural or social capital respondents possess. This finding disproves the previously mentioned Spatial Assimilation Theory, which believes that difficulties faced by internationals are temporary and will disappear with time. Although cultural capital did differ on the basis of (inter)nationality, the sole presence of discrimination proves that not all difficulties faced by internationals will diminish over time. It confirms the choice of Ethnic Stratification Model as the theoretical framework.

As suggested by literature, both the level of discrimination and the difficulties one faced when looking for accommodation had a significant effect on the level of positive experience students reported with regards to finding housing. Both those experiencing high levels of discrimination and those who indicate having high levels of difficulties finding housing show lower levels of positive experience. This result is of utmost importance. Firstly, it shows the impact of discriminatory behavior on personal experience of individuals. Encountering discriminatory behavior makes one’s search less pleasant, which will likely impact first impressions in relation to Ghent and Belgium as a whole. Secondly, a high level of difficulty experienced when finding housing is linked directly with a more negative experience, regardless of nationality. In an oversaturated market, this could not only impact international students, but also local students struggling to find appropriate housing. Interestingly, these significant effects disappeared when relating discriminatory experience and difficulties faced with the personal experience relating to current accommodation in Ghent. This suggests that once housing is found, the difference in level of positive experience disappears. If they find a housing option where they are welcome, international students end up significantly more content with their dorm than local students. However, this finding has to be partly nuanced, as bivariate statistics showed that internationals move significantly more. By moving multiple times, they will find housing that is more suitable to their taste. Local students move much less, and are more likely to stay in their first dorm. These trends can influence the level of positive experience students indicate having.

In short, international students were found to have a lower level of cultural capital and experience more discriminatory practices than local students do. Although discrimination and lack of social or cultural capital were theorized to have an impact on the difficulties international students face, this was not the case in my study. Likely due to an occurrence of oversaturation, local students face similar levels of difficulties as international students when looking for housing in Ghent. However, if the market changes, trends will change with it. Both a lack of capital and experiences of discrimination will likely have a significant impact under different circumstances. Facing high levels of discrimination does have an impact on the level of positive experience a respondent has, with those facing higher discrimination also reporting lower positive experience when looking for housing in Ghent. Similarly, those who indicate having high difficulties when looking for housing also rate the positivity of their experience lower. Both findings suggest important points for improvement.

# Recommendations

**7.1 Limitations and research recommendations**

Despite not having a large influence on the current trends of the student housing market, discrimination and lower levels of cultural capital are present among international students. This presence expresses a continuous need for research regarding the future development of the student housing market and its implications for international students. Changes in the market will automatically initiate changes in dynamics, which in turn can cause these specific international problems to directly influence chances of international students in finding suitable accommodation. Trends in an oversaturated market will not resemble those in an undersaturated market. It is important to know the implications of each kind. Further research should also be conducted in the fields of economic and social capital. Although economic capital was not an active part of this study, literature findings and bivariate statistics suggest that financial means will likely have an impact on the difficulties faced by international students. As they pay more rent on average, having sufficient economic options will be a vital aspect of finding accommodation in Ghent. Social capital was included in the research model, but was not investigated sufficiently to draw firm conclusions. More focus should be put on this form of capital, as I do believe it has an important impact on the difficulties of finding housing in Ghent. As a final recommendation, the impact of ethnicity on difficulties in the housing market should also be looked at. Not all international students look ‘foreign’ and not all Belgian students look ‘local’. As discrimination takes many forms, nationality will likely not be the only basis for unfair treatment. It is important to map all the ways in which students can be disadvantaged, in order to tackle them as accurately as possible.

**7.2 Implications for the city of Ghent and the university of Ghent**

The outcome of this research also has important implications for the city of Ghent and for the University of Ghent. My recommendations are three-fold: a commitment towards more options of affordable housing, a focus on the lowering of discriminatory attitudes and providing options to increase cultural capital of incoming students.

As a large majority of international students faces difficulties when entering the private market, student homes run by the university are their most viable option when looking for affordable housing. It is thus of great importance that the university puts a continuous focus on the increasing of housing units, as well as a commitment towards democratic prices and accessible information for international students. By providing international students with an affordable option through official channels, many of them will be spared the hassle of finding something on the private market. This will already have a large impact on the difficulties they face with regards to housing. The university has already expressed efforts in these directions, and is currently planning the creation of new student homes around the city.

A second set of implications should lower the amount of discriminatory attitudes and behaviors international students face on the student housing market. Research by Verhaeghe and colleagues has already shown that sensibilization works, and reminding people of their rights and duties can have a very important impact on discrimination levels. Discrimination on the basis of any grounds is illegal, and both landlords and renters should be made aware of this. Tied with this, regularly performed random checks in the form of experimental research could encourage landlords to change their behavior. Additionally, an independent contact point where students (and possibly other individuals) could file complaints with regards to discrimination in Ghent could map out where problems arise. A discriminatory contact point already exists on a national level, but a locally oriented one could tackle the problems more structurally. Important to note is that most discriminatory practices happen unconsciously and without bad intentions. To combat these, both the city of Ghent and the university of Ghent could inform landlords and motivate them in being as inclusive as possible. This could include the encouragement of the usage of both English and Dutch in communication and advertisements, attempts to rent out properties via more official channels rather than personal contacts and the lowering of ungrounded prejudice among other examples.

A final recommendation tackles the lack of cultural capital that incoming international students possess when entering the market. The level of Dutch is very low among international students, so offering affordable classes can rapidly increase the level of cultural capital. Although UGent already offers these classes, the level of Dutch among international students remains moderate at best. Promoting these classes and communicating their benefits to international students will likely increase participation and indirectly make the stay of international students in Ghent easier. Additionally, both the University of Ghent and the city of Ghent should provide clear and complete information with regards to the housing market. International students that do not end up in homes seem quite lost when it comes to finding housing. By informing them of how the market works (including informal channels such as Facebook or other social media), and providing them with useful data such as price averages, different types of housing and what to expect when renting in Ghent, the knowledge gap between them and local students will diminish, and international students will be one step closer to fair chances when looking for student accommodation in Ghent.

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